

■ Introduction

Urban design refers to the dynamic relationship of land uses and how they are connected within the built environment. More specifically, urban design strategies determine the configuration of buildings, open spaces and transportation networks within a community. Ultimately, urban design is about connections.

At the scale of “the town,” urban design elements such as lighting, signage, landscaping, street furniture and architectural guidelines, create the visual character and identity of a place, making it recognizable and distinct from other towns. When applied within a comprehensive system of connected streets, sidewalks, greenways, and open space, urban design has the power to transform intersections into walkable districts, and subdivisions into neighborhoods.

At the scale of “the county,” urban design focuses on the linkages between communities and their relationships to one another. Thus, at the level of a comprehensive plan, urban design strategies focus less on the visual appearance of buildings and streets and more on the organization of neighborhoods, commercial areas and open spaces and their connectivity to one another within a larger framework.

In the context of the Columbia County Growth Management Plan, the urban design chapter describes a classification of development patterns, their distinct differences and their relationship to one another as the County continues to grow over the next 20-years. Furthermore, this chapter identifies opportunities for future urban design initiatives and regulatory controls that strive to enhance and preserve the unique character of specific areas of the county.

■ Development Patterns

As stated in *Chapter 2: Vision 2020*, the County’s vision for the future is based on a pattern of continued growth focused on identified development nodes in strategic locations throughout the County. These nodes are intended to act as community centers where inevitable growth is managed at a human scale and where new development integrates living, working, shopping, and playing in close proximity to one another. The nodes are described as one of three types based on their density, access, and allowable uses: (1) Neighborhood Centers, (2) Town Centers, and (3) Commerce Centers.

Neighborhood Centers

The definition of a Neighborhood Center is a place where small-scale commercial uses, such as a bank, grocery store, drug store, cleaner, and gas station are arranged in a village-like setting that might include a neighborhood park or school. As illustrated on the Development Opportunities Map, Neighborhood Centers are located in the outlying areas of the county. These areas are typically rural in character and tend to attract residents who desire single-family homes on large lots. Thus, a Neighborhood Center is envisioned as a compact assortment of convenience-oriented retail stores and services to address the demands of adjacent residents in the less urbanized parts of the County.

From an urban design perspective, sidewalks are important circulation features in Neighborhood Centers, but even more important is the scale of the roads that serve these areas. Given

its small scale and often pastoral nature, a Neighborhood Center would be overwhelmed by wide thoroughfares carrying high-speed traffic and instead should rely on more modestly scaled roadways and tree-lined streets. Similarly, urban design elements such as pedestrian lights, consistent signage, and landscaping contribute to the quaint character of Neighborhood Centers and create a sense of place in what may have once been little more than a crossroads.

Town Centers

Typically located at the convergence of major transit corridors, Town Centers in Columbia County are envisioned as places where a compatible mixture of residential, commercial, service, and recreational uses are integrated and linked together by a comprehensive circulation system. Whereas someone might live near a Neighborhood Center but work outside the County, the concept of a Town Center includes a variety of housing options, regional employment opportunities, businesses, offices, retail shops, services, well-placed parks, plazas, and open spaces that create a community where it is possible to live, work, and play.

These land use components will coexist as part of a collective approach to creating communities that are safe, attractive, and convenient for pedestrians and motorists alike. Buildings will be designed to conform to architectural standards and oriented in close proximity to each other to facilitate walking instead of driving. Community facilities such as schools, libraries and government offices, serve as anchors for Town Centers, and help to create identity. Urban design features such as lighting, coordinated signage, street furniture and landscaping are used as visual cues that create a recognizable character for Town Centers. Furthermore, historic or natural resources within Town Centers should be enhanced and preserved as a means of defining a distinct identity or sense of place.

Access is provided through a comprehensive system of streets, sidewalks and greenways that intersect at key locations and connect residential areas to commercial uses. Whereas transportation efforts in a Neighborhood Center might focus on traffic calming measures along “main street,” Town Centers present greater challenges related to coordinating a variety of transit options.

In Columbia County the following five locations are designated as Town Centers on the Development Opportunities Map: Evans, Harlem, Grovetown, Appling, and Greenbrier. Though they are of varying scales and densities, each of these places, with the exception of Greenbrier, is already on its way to functioning as a legitimate Town Center. The Greenbrier area was identified as the next viable Town Center by virtue of its proximity to the intersections of William Few Parkway and Hardy-McManus Road with Washington Road, the recent construction of three new schools serving children in grades K-12, and the pending development of several new P.U.D. projects that incorporate a mix of uses.

Commerce Centers

Like Town Centers, Commerce Centers rely on access to transit, particularly the I-20 corridor, to determine their location within the County. Commerce Centers are envisioned as destinations for expanded interstate trade opportunities and would accommodate higher densities in order to create a synergy between retail, office, industry and other commercial uses. Less pedestrian oriented than Town or Neighborhood Centers, Commerce Centers are dependent upon access not only to transportation networks, but also to technology and communication infrastructures. Similarly, the provision of adequate public services in the form of water, sewer, and power are critical to the functionality of these areas.

From an urban design standpoint, the most critical element in creating a visually appealing Commerce Center is the enforcement of appropriate development standards to ensure adequate site plans and landscaping. Buffers are critical between incompatible uses and guidelines that address signage and lighting will help to mitigate the negative impacts of a high concentration of commercial uses. While Columbia County is focused on attracting only clean industries

to the area, such establishments still require large warehouse buildings and vast amounts of parking and loading/unloading areas that should be screened from view. In addition, certain commercial uses such as car dealerships require careful site planning to minimize curb cuts and reduce the perception of parking as the primary use.

■ Urban Design Mechanisms

There are a variety of ways to achieve the County's vision for the future. From an urban design standpoint, the key is to avoid dispersed development projects that are unrelated to one another and exist in isolation at random locations. Instead, by focusing new development in Town Centers, Neighborhood Centers, or Commerce Centers, and arranging these centers within a comprehensive circulation system that incorporates multiple modes of transit, the County will achieve a sustainable development pattern that will carry them through to the year 2020.

Columbia County's urban design strategy is a two-step process that begins with the effort to define the character of a place (Urban Design Plan) and ends with establishing the regulatory measures (Zoning Overlay) required to protect that character.

Urban Design Plan

An Urban Design Plan is an invaluable resource that can be used to shape the character of a place and ensure that future growth and development projects are in keeping with the community's vision. It is recommended that urban design plans be prepared for the other Town Centers in the County, particularly Appling and Greenbrier. Given the concentration of historic properties in the vicinity of Appling, and its identity as the symbolic county seat, it is anticipated that an urban design plan for this area would have a strong historic preservation focus. In contrast, the Greenbrier Town Center offers a relatively "clean slate" on which a distinct identity can be created. Furthermore, current development pressures in this area necessitate the creation of an urban design plan as soon as possible in order to maximize opportunities for integrated land uses connected by sensible circulation patterns.

In 1998, the County's Planning and Development Services Division initiated this process when they sponsored the development of an Urban Design Plan for the Evans Town Center. This document provides a framework in which the unique identity of Evans is defined and formalized through architecture and community design standards in conjunction with a pedestrian and vehicular circulation plan.

Zoning Overlay

Typically, a natural outcome of an urban design plan is the recommendation to formulate design guidelines and implement regulatory controls to speak to specific development characteristics such as site planning, massing, scale, and density. This can be achieved several ways, one of which is to add the requirement for a site plan ("sketch" plan) for all applications during the rezoning process. Furthermore, the County should add a Zoning Overlay district that would supplement current zoning provisions and safeguard the designated area from development patterns that perpetuate sprawl. A Zoning Overlay can address issues such as the intensity of development along streets and open spaces, parking requirements, setback, streetscape, landscape, architectural materials and expression, and guidelines for the mix of stores, offices and housing within walkable distances. Currently, there are several areas in need of immediate designation with overlay districts, such as the land adjacent to major thoroughfares of Fury's Ferry Road, Washington and Belair Roads, in order to protect these corridors as they transition from residential to commercial uses. By implementing this type of control measure, Columbia County can continue to support pro-growth policies while remaining confident about maintaining its desired character and pride of place.

